

Aspects of Life During the Neolithic Period

Food Supply

One of the most important changes from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic period was the way in which people obtained food. For thousands of years, Paleolithic hunter-gatherers had to search for enough food to eat. But hunting animals and gathering plants did not provide a reliable food supply. The animals and plants became *scarce* (rare) when the people stayed in one area for too long. Women and girls, who did most of the plant gathering, gradually learned that they could produce their own food by planting seeds. Over time, these first farmers *cultivated*, or grew, the seeds that would produce the most grain. By 4000 B.C.E., farmers were growing corn in Mexico, rice in China, and wheat and barley in Israel. In addition, Neolithic farmers found important uses for animals. They tamed, or *domesticated*, calm and healthy sheep, dogs, goats, and cattle. People used the animals to help carry heavy burdens over long distances, and they bred the large ones as sources of many kinds of food. For example, goats and cattle provided farmers with milk, and in the winter they could be killed to supply people with extra food. Together, the cultivation of plants and the domestication of animals is known as *agriculture*. The development of agriculture provided Neolithic people with a more reliable food supply. Therefore, people did not have to constantly wander in search of food, but could settle down to live in one area.

Occupations

During the Paleolithic period, people's main occupation was probably finding enough food to survive. During the Neolithic period, however, the increase in a reliable food supply freed people to refine special skills. These skills included sewing, building, and toolmaking. For example, in the wealthy town of Çatal Höyük in modern-day Turkey, people developed a way to spin and weave. They wove natural fibers such as wool and linen into comfortable cloth. Other people mined flint rocks and *obsidian*, a black volcanic glass, from the mountains. Stoneworkers used these two hard rocks to create very sharp tools and fashion shiny jewelry and mirrors. Neolithic house builders began to pay special attention to homes' artistic and religious purposes. For example, a builder might smooth the house walls over with plaster and decorate them with colorful dyes. Builders also constructed special rooms called *shrines* to honor Gods and Goddesses. Daily life during the Neolithic period changed greatly because people occupied their time with many different activities in addition to obtaining food.

Population/Settlement

Neolithic settlements were much larger and more permanent than Paleolithic settlements. During the Paleolithic period, people traveled in bands of 20 to 60 people and lived in temporary settlements as they searched for food. During the Neolithic period, however, many people could live in one place for a long time because farming provided a reliable source of food. Some settlements grew to be as large as thousands of people. The growth in population enabled people to share work responsibilities within their settlements. Working together greatly improved food production and living conditions. For example, Neolithic people shared the work of cultivating crops and building permanent houses and storage huts. Toolmakers often sat around a fire and worked together in “factories” making stone axes and knife blades. In the town of Çatal Höyük, farmers cultivated more than 14 different kinds of food plants for the city’s population of about 8,000. Other people built new homes, decorated shrines (places of worship), and made tools. People’s settled lifestyles also encouraged them to bury their dead in special places. For example, in Çatal Höyük, they buried their dead underneath the floors of their houses. As Neolithic settlements grew, people’s lives became more rich and varied.

Resources

During the Paleolithic period, people used only the resources that they had in their immediate area, such as water and plants. They rarely traded with other groups of people. By contrast, during the Neolithic period, trade among settlements in the Near East and around the Mediterranean Sea grew dramatically. Trade arose when people began to seek resources that did not exist in their immediate area. As their technology grew more sophisticated, people wanted additional resources to improve the strength and beauty of their buildings, crafts, and tools. One of the materials Neolithic traders most desired was the black volcanic glass called *obsidian*, which could be found mostly in Anatolia, or modern-day Turkey. Traders all around the Mediterranean Sea sought obsidian because it could be used to make excellent knife blades and mirrors. People also traded for goods that could be used to enhance their appearance. For example, women used a red ore (mixture of rock and metal) called *hematite* as makeup. They rubbed the hematite on their cheeks and lips to give them a reddish glow. Men and women also strung seashells together to make bracelets and necklaces. To obtain desired resources, people often traveled hundreds of miles across mountains by foot, across deserts on donkeys, and across the sea on ships.

Shelter

The types of shelter in which people lived changed from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic period. In the Paleolithic period, people may have lived in tents or met under rock shelters to share food and ideas. These shelters were often temporary because people had to move frequently to follow the wild animals they hunted for food. As people began to settle down and farm during the Neolithic period, they built more permanent settlements in which they could live and work. People built long-lasting houses from mud bricks, sometimes adding stones and branches to strengthen the roofs and walls. Neolithic houses were either round or rectangular in shape and contained one or more rooms. In Çatal Höyük, people entered the houses by climbing down a wooden ladder that was attached to the roof. Many houses had ovens and basins built right into the floor for storing food. For additional comfort, people took their waste outside the house and disposed of it in a courtyard. These changes in shelter during the Neolithic period provided people with a more comfortable and stable lifestyle.

Technology

Tools and clothing changed a great deal from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic period. During the Paleolithic period, hunter-gatherers used stone “choppers” to chop wood and cut meat. In the Neolithic period, toolmakers improved their stone tools by chipping away at large pieces of flint to create sharp axes. They also used obsidian to make excellent knife blades. People discovered that metal was easier to work with than stone because it was harder to break and could be melted, molded, and reshaped. Metalworkers began using metals such as gold and copper to make jewelry and tools. People also gradually replaced the rough animal skins they probably wore in the Paleolithic period with more lightweight wool, cotton, and silk clothing. They began to use clay pottery for cooking and keeping food instead of animal skins and grass baskets. Clay pottery lasted longer because it could withstand high temperatures. Some archeologists think that clay pottery was invented by accident when a cook used clay to smooth the inside of a basket, baked it over a fire, and then found only the clay bowl left when the basket burned away. All of these changes in technology during the Neolithic period improved the quality and comfort of people’s daily lives.